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ABSTRACT

The Rockefeller Commission's "Report on the Humanities in American Life" is critiqued with special emphasis on its implications for historians. The Report's salient features are discussed first, including: the premise that the humanities are a vital social good: the call for closer ties with the sciences: the assertion that money alone will not strengthen the humanities: and the recommendation that advocates of the humanities separate themselves from the back-to-basics movement. The paper then presents a critical analysis of the Report's recommendations dealing with community colleges, school/college collaboration, and federal aid administered through the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Central to this critique are the observations that: (1) community colleges hold little promise for strengthening the humanities: (2) the integration of humanities instruction into educationally unsound vocational courses may be counterproductive: (3) the Report's recommendations for increased school/college articulation suggest that things be done to schools rather than with schools: and (4) the NEH has been successful in affecting all levels of education, considering grant proposals on their own merits, and separating itself from the responsibilities of the Department of Education. Finally, the paper concurs with the Report's contention that history is within the scope of the humanities and urges historians to increase their professional contacts with other humanists. (JP)

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Panel Discussion on "The Humanities in American Life."

Myron Marty

American Humanities Association
December 28, 1980
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PANEL DISCUSSION on THE HUMANITIES IN AMERICAN LIFE - Myron Marty
AHA Meeting - Washington, D.C., December 28, 1980, 12:30 P.M.

Perhaps your thoughts were the same as mine when you saw the New Yorker cartoon: "I knew we were endangered, all right," says the one befuddled fish to the other, "but did you know we were snail darters?" And perhaps you noticed the news item several months ago reporting the discovery of snail darters in other streams. To some streams they had been transplanted, but to others, apparently, they had found their own way. Just possibly, if you put the news item together with the cartoon, your thoughts were again the same as mine.

One of the happy discoveries being made today by men and women whose callings have put them on lists of the endangered is that they have more than endangerment in common with others of their genus. Their species may be historian, or philosopher, or linguist, but their genus is humanist. With others of their genus, they share values, perspectives, and goals. Discovering what they have in common, they also find, sometimes to their surprise, that they can thrive in new streams--streams they would not have thought of testing had their more natural ones remained clear and congenial.

One of the good things about the Rockefeller Commission's Report on the Humanities in American Life is that it balances its justified and well-documented concern over endangerment with sound counsel on combatting the forces of peril and good advice on freshening the waters or finding new streams.

My assignment is to consider the Report's analyses and recommendations regarding a) the humanities in community colleges; b) possibilities for collaboration between high schools, colleges, and universities; and c) matters pertaining to federal support for the humanities. Because this assignment can be carried out swiftly, I shall precede it with some general observations about the report and follow it with brief remarks on some specific implications of the Report for historians. To conclude, I shall turn to the most important question the report implicitly raises: What precedes a first priority? In responding to this question, I shall offer a simple suggestion for increasing the effectiveness of historians in giving force to the recommendations in the Report.

The Report bears a number of striking features. The first is found in the premise from which it proceeds: that the humanities are a social good; that their well-being is in the national interest; that they are widely undervalued and often poorly understood; and that means exist for invigorating them--these means being "a reconsideration of their purposes in education and public life and a mobilization of resources in their behalf." (p. 4)

In exploring possibilities for strengthening the place of humanities in American life, the Report asserts that blaming the economy for every woe won't do. "No law of history," it says, "proves that minds must close when belts are tightened." The same might be said of pointing to the vocationalism vogue or the maturing of the baby boom generation as causes of the decline of liberal education. The Commission believes, the Report asserts, that

the "humanities need reaffirmation as much as support. We see our Report primarily as a contribution to rethinking the humanities, not as a shopping list. We hope that all who want to improve the education and the quality of life will share this view."

The Report does not back away from an analysis of the relation between the humanities and science and technology, urging instead a desire to underscore the creative connections between them and the potential for constructive relations in solving problems. It is not surprising, therefore, to see the Report insist that "computer literacy must now be considered among the goals of a liberal education by all colleges and universities." (p. 71) It does not carry its analysis of the humanities-science tension as far as I would have preferred, but I recognize that one slim book cannot do everything.

It is good to see the report attack the threadbare quality of the "back to the basics" movements and to insist on separating efforts to strengthen the humanities from such movements. (p.28) This I take to be a warning to humanists against allowing themselves to be used by those who might seem to be on their side but who in fact are not.

The Report as an entity is surprisingly coherent. How difficult it must have been to put together a document representing the viewpoints of three dozen individuals whose common quality was surely not a propensity for conformity or a willingness to compromise cherished beliefs! Its very existence is a

singular accomplishment. Think, too, about the challenge of making a literate piece out of an essay that in the course of things must deal with 27 associations, 13 councils, 12 foundations, 9 commissions, 5 centers, 5 programs, 4 institutes, 4 boards, 3 services, 2 conferences, 2 cabinet departments, 2 endowments, 2 offices, 2 federations, an assembly, a guild a corporation, a network, a nationwide faculty, a trust, an enquiry, a circle, and a group. And think of the dollar questions to be considered and the fact that many of the dollar questions must be treated in the context of FY 1979 and FY-whatever. And realize, too, that the Report deals with other reports and with surveys, programs, proposals, projects, task forces, and the like.

These are matters that do not lend themselves to literary grace or stylistic ease, and I am a bit impatient with those who dismiss the Report on the grounds that it is not a humanistic document, something less than inspired.

One cannot read the Report without being struck by the prominent part played by the National Endowment for the Humanities in virtually all of the issues the Report addresses. Again and again the Report refers to some aspect of the work of the Endowment, and it concludes with 18 pages or so devoted specifically to problems and possibilities of the Endowment in efforts to invigorate the humanities. (Noting this feature gives me occasion to emphasize that when I was invited to join this panel the person extending the invitation was unaware of my imminent

move to the Endowment staff and to stress that NEH staff members sometimes speak on their own behalf, as I am here today. In other words, I am here today as a historian whose personal interests and views have not been erased by an affiliation with the Endowment--nor do those personal views necessarily reflect the position of the Endowment.)

Now, to the assignment. What does the Report say about the humanities and community colleges? Briefly, and not surprisingly, this: that community colleges should give attention to integrating humanities into occupational education; that community colleges may be good places for testing integrated approaches to humanities education (cross-, multi-, inter-disciplinary); that multi-media instructional approaches seem to work in community colleges and might well be emulated: that community colleges should not be seen as the dumping grounds for humanists who could not find jobs in higher education; that strong administrative support is essential if the humanities are to be infused into occupational programs. It takes note, too, of a new organization, the Community College Humanities Association, an organization that shows promise, in my judgment, of accomplishing things that species organizations cannot.

These may be unimaginative recommendations, but they are sound. The principal problem with them lies, in my judgment, in the failure of the Report to acknowledge just how difficult it is to accomplish what it proposes. Although solid information is hard to obtain, it is a safe surmise that the statistics on

the decline of the humanities in higher education are at their most extreme in two-year institutions. Such promise as these institutions hold for the humanities may well be in their appeal to older, more mature, already working adults. On the whole, though, reasons for optimism regarding the future of the humanities in two-year institutions are hard to find.

There is a risk, too, in heeding the repeated assertions, in the Report and elsewhere, that the humanities should be infused into occupational programs of two-year colleges. They seem to suggest that the occupational programs are successful both in preparing students for careers (actually they ordinarily aim only at development of "entry-level job skills) and in finding them jobs. Evidence to support such claims of success is scarce. Advocates of the humanities should be careful to avoid grafting their hopes for strengthening humanities education on a form of education that is in fact, if not in the public understanding, failing.

Three of the Report's recommendations deal specifically with articulation of efforts between various levels of education. The first is Recommendation 7 (p. 51) "We recommend that learned societies take a more active interest in the education and professional development of high school teachers in the humanities. Learned societies should develop guidelines for the education of teachers in humanistic disciplines and sponsor workshops and conferences to help teachers further their knowledge."

Separated from the elaboration that follows it, Recommendation 9 is a real marshmallow. It says simply: "We recommend

that colleges and universities encourage their faculty to help improve education in the humanities." Recommendation 10 (p. 56) is more to the point: "Because schools change slowly, we endorse models of school-college collaboration that emphasize long-term cooperation. We recommend that more colleges and universities and school districts adopt such programs for their mutual benefit and that funding sources sustain programs and administrative costs on a continuing basis."

What the last phrase of the recommendations means is not clear. If it means that a funding source like the Endowment should continue to provide monies for keeping programs going, even for covering administrative costs, it does not appear to be feasible. The total budget for the Elementary and Secondary Program of the Endowment is under five million dollars. Not many programs can be sustained on that. The current Endowment position is that grant money is better spent by getting things started, establishing exemplary programs, and providing for widespread dissemination of ideas and practices that work.

The problem with all three of these recommendations, as with the tone of the Report, is that it suggests things to be done to the schools rather than with the schools. The Endowment has been encouraging efforts that support collaboration of schools and colleges at all stages of a project, from conception to initiation of a plan to execution to evaluation and dissemination. There is something about the Report that makes this a plausible inference: The Commission looked at the total scene, assessed what had been tried, knew about the difficulties

the humanities faced in higher education, spotted the schools and said, "Why not? Let's give them a try." To the schools I would say, in the words of Thoreau: "If you see a man approaching you with the obvious intent of doing you good, you should run for your life."

A large part of the Report is devoted to the matter of federal support for the humanities in schools and public life. This part necessarily focuses on the National Endowment for the Humanities, for as the Report states, "During the past fifteen years, the NEH has become the largest single benefactor for the humanities . . . . As an advocate and a source of support, the Endowment has put the humanities on the map in the nation's capital, underscoring the conclusion of the Humanities Commission of 1964--that it is in the national interest for the federal government to give substantial support to the humanities."

I would like to make just three observations about federal support. First, the Endowment has succeeded in making a few dollars go a long way. The Education Division in its 15 year history has awarded about 2800 grants in the amount of approximately $150,000,000 in outright funds. The Report includes capsule summaries of the results of many of these projects. There are, of course, many projects that do not accomplish their purposes, but many more of them do, and the agency is convinced that the impact of its funding on curricula in all levels of education is significant.

Second, the Endowment has an affect on curricula in institutions whose applications for funding are not approved as well as in those receiving grants. The very process of making application forces an institution to ask hard questions of itself. Sometimes it turns out that the answers do not require external support for implementation.

The third observation grows out of a question we are asked frequently by persons who are not familiar with NEH funding methods: What is the Endowment funding this year? The conception is that money is allocated to certain categories and that the way to get assistance is to know the categories. In fact, the Endowment responds to expressions of need by individuals and institutions. It may encourage projects of a certain sort, but every applicant has an opportunity to make its own case without regard to any categories of official interest, and decisions on the applications are made in a peer review process in which each one succeeds or fails on its merits. Incidentally, if you detect in this a tension between leading the way in humanities endeavors and responding to the interests and desires of the academic community and the public, you are sensitive to the real situation. To fail to lead would be irresponsible; to fail to respond would be equally so.

The fourth observation grows out of another question: What is the relationship between NEH and the Department of Education? The answer is easy: We have no formal attachment to the Department of Education, and concerning programs, as a general rule if

they do something, we don't. We have worked out a long and complicated chart delineating the efforts of each agency, and it is accurate to say that there is no overlap.

The Report raises some important questions for historians, the most important one being one of identity. Do historians see themselves as humanists or as social scientists? The Report consistently places history in the humanities. Yet, history departments are quite frequently placed in social science divisions and historians sometimes identify themselves as social scientists. How can we justify placing it in the humanities? By pointing out that history's content is humanity and humanness. Its quest for the meaning of humanness is carried out with the language of the humanities, using words like reality, appearance, illusion, destiny, free will, fortune, fate, drama, tragedy, happiness and peace. This list of terms, called by Albert William Levi the "language of imagination," might have added to it such words as purpose, pleasure, hope, despair, fear, form, harmony, unity, coherence, balance, beauty, feeling, experience, existence, transcendence, image, symbol, myth, morality, value, taste, freedom, equality, welfare, justice, irony, right, wrong, good, evil, artificiality, style, victory, defeat, birth, death, and self. Social science methods might be used in the quest for the meaning of humanness, but the method of historians remains, it seems to me, the method of the humanist.

I spoke earlier of historians as a species, the genus being humanist. The point is that there are allies in other humanistic disciplines with whom historians have not worked as closely as they might have. In visiting campuses in all parts of the country in the past decade, and in monitoring efforts to improve the teaching of history, I am struck with the absence of genus-consciousness among the species. Historians see themselves as having little in common with philosophers or linguists, and they therefore do little to build alliances with them. All the while that they know they are endangered, they do not seem to realize that they are humanists, endangered together, humanists whose cooperative efforts might improve the well-being of all.

There is even a failure to recognize that academic historians are but subspecies in the genus, and that they have much in common with others of their species like archivists and museologists. A singular virtue of the Commission's Report is that it does not overlook the non-academic subspecies of genus humanist.

Perhaps the discovery of endangered ones that they belong to a larger group than they had suspected and, as they are showing in ways the Report demonstrates but which I have not referred to here, that they can swim in other streams, will lead to another discovery: that the constituency of the humanities in the general public is much larger than has been assumed and, not surprisingly, that it just doesn't know that it is the humanities' constituency.

The Report establishes priorities, the first one being a very proper one and the others hard to argue with. But what must precede a first priority? Nothing less than a cultural revolution. The Report will not do anything to improve the state of the humanities in the United States, much less to bring about such a revolution. It is a text with no power of its own. It is a text awaiting explication and application. It remains with those of the genus whose interest it addresses to put its recommendations into effect. It remains with those of the species with the most wide-ranging interests and integrative capacities to lead the way.

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